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## The Armenian Problem: What was the United States' response to the Armenian Genocide?

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## THE ARMENIAN PROBLEM:

*What was the United States' response to the Armenian  
Genocide?*

Alex Fleming

IB History HL II

Mr. Kobrowski

03/04/2013

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## A. PLAN OF THE INVESTIGATION

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### *What was the United States' response to the Armenian Genocide?*

In 1915, a horrific genocide occurred in Armenia, a small country in the South Eastern edge of Europe. Masked by an image of “deportations”, the genocide stood for the mass killing of Christian Armenians in an area under Turkish Muslim rule. Over the years, the genocide has had long-lasting effects upon Armenians, as many lost family and friends through this horrible tragedy, however, it is somewhat unclear as to whether or not the Armenian people were helped during the time of the genocide. With that said, this investigation will explore United States' response to the Armenian Genocide and will include accounts by American citizens and any actions taken in relation to the genocide with the intent of discovering how the United States responded to the genocide overall. On the other hand, it will not include any information on the genocide from the perspective of Armenians. The majority of research will come from primary sources, including telegrams and press coverage, however, secondary print sources, both opinionated and factual, will be used as well.



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## B. SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE:

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“Between 1915 and 1918 the Ottoman Empire, ruled by Muslim Turks, carried out a policy to eliminate its Christian Armenian minority” (Adalian). “The ‘international community’ such as it was, did little to contest the Turkish horrors, which began nine months into World War I” (Power 4). “On May 24, 1915, the Allied governments did deliver a joint declaration that took the unprecedented step of condemning ‘crimes against humanity and civilization’ ...The United States, determined to maintain its neutrality in the war, refused to join the Allied declaration...Because the Turks had not violated the rights of Americans, Wilson did not formally protest” (Power 5). Yet Henry Morgenthau, United States Ambassador in Constantinople, “refused to accept what he called the ‘cold-blooded legalities of the situation’, and by the summer of 1915 he was urging President Wilson and his administration to appeal to Turkey to put a stop to the annihilation of Armenians and to immediately grant Americans ‘every facility’ to administer relief and financial assistance to the survivors of the deportations” (Balakian 277). Morgenthau continuously sent telegrams<sup>1</sup> to Washington to “supplement his dispatches”,

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<sup>1</sup> See Figure 3 in Appendix A

yet the response he received from Secretary of State Robert Lansing<sup>2</sup> was to “continue to act as in the past”, and a question of if any Americans “received injuries during this trouble?” (Armenian National Institute). Yet while those in Washington didn’t take action against the genocide, Theodore Roosevelt “had become a passionate advocate”, as he called the massacre “the greatest crime of the war” ( Balakian 293). Another group told of the horrors of genocide; “As American missionaries were driven out of Turkey, they returned to the United States with stories to tell” (Power 12). In addition, “the New York times provided copious coverage from April onward” (326). Many other newspapers across the United States reported widespread coverage on the genocide. For example, a cartoon<sup>3</sup> represents world response to the Armenian Genocide and was published in the *Chicago Tribune*, and another cartoon<sup>4</sup> demonstrates American response through the large, cold hand put up against the starving Armenians, and was published in *New York World* (Ahmaranian). These public reports on the genocide urged the American people to help the Armenians: “A number of distinguished Americans, none of Armenian descent, set up a committee on Armenian Atrocities. The

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<sup>2</sup> See Figure 4 in Appendix A

<sup>3</sup> See Figure 1 in Appendix A

<sup>4</sup> See Figure 2 in Appendix A

committee raised \$100,000 for Armenian relief and staged high profile rallies...to join in denouncing Turkish crimes (Power 11). After fighting for the United States to aid Armenians but getting no help, "Morgenthau was too sickened to stay at his post. 'My failure to stop the destruction of Armenians made Turkey for me a place of horror', he later wrote. He left for home...to tell the president what he had witnessed" (Bass 330). Author Gary Bass also reports that "In February 1916, the Wilson administration began making angrier complaints to the Ottoman Empire. In addition to policy from Morgenthau, Roosevelt, and the broader public, the policy shift likely reflected a White House and State Department realization that sending aid to the survivors was a less risky proposition than making military threats" (Bass 330). This lead Secretary of State Robert Lansing to admit "that the State Department had been 'withholding from the American people the facts now in its possession' - an official cover-up of genocide" (Bass 330). "In a post-war period, the popular support of a just settlement for Armenia would be led by the American Committee for the Independence of Armenia (ACIA), and that movement would test the relationship between popular appeals for aid and justice and the limits of

what the federal government would and would not do for a foreign people" (Balakian 296).

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C. EVALUATION OF SOURCES:

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Morgenthau, Henry, Sr. Telegram to Secretary of State, Washington. 16 July 1915. *Armenian National Institute*.  
Armenian National Institute, n.d. Web. 24 Dec. 2012.

“Report that Ottoman Turkey is Seeking to Exterminate the Armenian Nation” is a primary source whose origin is a telegram sent by Henry Morgenthau, American Ambassador to Constantinople, to the Secretary of State in Washington DC on July 16, 1915 at 1:00 pm. Its purpose is to inform Secretary of State Robert Lansing that the Turkish intend to exterminate the peaceful Armenian people and to suggest that Secretary of State Lansing informs other nations of the Turkish plan. This is a valuable source because, as the American Ambassador to Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau was able to see the Turkish threats occurring firsthand because he was located in an area where the attempts at extermination were likely taking place. A limitation, however, is that it is unclear as to if Morgenthau actually saw the tragedy being executed, or if he acted off of eyewitness accounts, so it is unclear if Morgenthau is aware of the full significance of the extermination situation or not.

Lansing, Robert, Sr. Telegram to American Embassy,  
Constantinople. 16 July 1915. *Armenian National Institute*.

Armenian National Institute, n.d. Web. 24 Dec. 2012.

The second source, "Secretary of State Robert Lansing's response to news that Ottoman Turkey is pursuing a policy of genocide against the Armenians" originates as a telegram sent by Secretary of State Robert Lansing to the American Embassy in Constantinople on July 16, 1915. The purpose of the source is for Lansing to provide a response to Morgenthau's previous alert of the Armenian extermination by Turkey; Lansing agrees to pleading to stop Armenian extermination, yet ends by commenting that no further help can be given by his department, and asks if any Americans have been hurt. A value is that this is an original response from Lansing to Constantinople, showing that the response given by Lansing is not likely to be falsified. However, a limitation is that because the telegram is simply addressed to the American Embassy in Constantinople, it is unclear whether the telegram was intended to go to Henry Morgenthau, as it may be assumed, or to another individual involved in alerting the US government of the Turkish crimes.

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D. ANALYSIS

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When the Armenian Genocide had begun, World War I was well underway, allowing for the war to play as a distraction for the American government especially because President Wilson was insistent on remaining neutral during the war, and therefore didn't believe that the genocide was of his concern. After researching the United States' response to the genocide, it seems clear that there really wasn't much, yet differing views on Wilson and the United States' involvement do exist; Samantha Power, author of *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, stresses that the United States government took very little action to stop the Turkish from mass murder. However, on the other hand Peter Balakian, author of *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response*, praises President Wilson for his involvement in urging Turkey to stop the genocide. With that said, it is somewhat difficult to come to a highly accurate conclusion about America's involvement in the genocide, yet it seems clear that the United States government didn't see the genocide as a national priority, specifically because Secretary of State Lansing ignored Morgenthau's pleas for aid and rather focused on American interests in the genocide, asking if any

American people were hurt<sup>5</sup>. In addition, this is emphasized by the fact that Morgenthau had to leave his post in Turkey because he was so strongly against the genocide and frustrated by the lack of action taken by the United States government. This idea is further shown through Wilson's refusal to join the Allied government's joint declaration to condemn crimes against humanity and civilization, because he believed that the Turks had not violated the rights of Americans, when, because he decided not to help the Armenian people, many tried to escape Armenia and travel to the United States. With that said, one could argue that the genocide was a concern affecting the American people since many Armenians became U.S. citizens. In addition, the American public, after seeing news on the genocide in newspapers, felt strongly about helping the Armenian people survive and stopping the Turks from completing further deportations of the Armenians, yet again, Wilson didn't take strong action to stop the genocide. It is further shown that the United States government didn't take action against the genocide through a cartoon<sup>6</sup>, showing an Armenian woman and her child standing outside of Congress in ragged clothing with thin bodies being rejected by the Congressmen's large palms, shown through a slightly opened

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<sup>5</sup> See Figures 3 & 4 in Appendix A

<sup>6</sup> See Figure 2 in Appendix A



door. This emphasizes that the United States government wasn't willing to help the Armenians because such a cartoon, blatantly against aiding the Armenian people, was run in *New York World*, a newspaper that is devoted to "deepening public understanding of the ways city and state government shape life in New York City", showing that the people of New York (or at least this artist) saw the genocide as a greater problem than the government did, and that these people knew that the government was ignoring the genocide (New York World). In connection, American people worked toward helping the Armenians, holding fundraisers to send aid to the Armenians, and spreading word of the genocide. With that said, although the United States Government seems to have ignored the Armenian Genocide, the efforts of the American people to help the Armenians show that there was an American response to the genocide, however, the political response lacked real action.

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## E. CONCLUSION

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After investigating the United States' response to the Armenian Genocide, it is hard to say that the United States didn't respond in any way, yet the government did not do anything to stop it. The American people attempted to aid the Armenians through donations, and popular media such as newspapers tried to raise awareness of the genocide through articles and cartoons. Individuals such as Henry Morgenthau worked to condemn the crimes against humanity, yet received no help whatsoever from the U.S. government, specifically because President Wilson was so focused on remaining neutral in the midst of World War I. In conclusion, no real action was taken by the United States government to stop the Armenian Genocide; however, in the end the government did admit an attempt to cover up the genocide from the American people and began working to free Armenian after WWI.

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## APPENDIX A

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THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE WHOLE  
HUMAN RACE WAS INTERESTED IN  
ARMENIA



BUT NOW THE HUMAN RACE IS INTERESTED  
ELSEWHERE

—(MC CUTCHEON) *Chicago Tribune*, June, 1920

Figure 1 (Ahmaranian)



GO AWAY!

—(KIRBY) *New York World*, 1920

Figure 2 (Ahmaranian)

Genocide  
Memorials

Photo Collections

Press Coverage

Sample Documents

Genocide Map

Genocide FAQ

Encyclopedia  
Entries

Chronology

Site Map

Background  
Reading

Related  
Organizations

Centuries of  
Genocide

America and the  
Armenian Genocide  
of 1915

## Report that Ottoman Turkey is seeking to exterminate the Armenian nation, July 16, 1915

Home > Genocide Research > Sample Archival Documents on the Armenian Genocide

WSB TELEGRAM RECEIVED GREEN CIPHER

From Constantinople  
Dated JUL 20 1915  
Recd. JUL 20 1915 A.M.

INDEX BUREAU  
67446  
1915

THIRD ASSISTANT  
JUL 20 1915  
SECRETARY

Secretary of State,  
Washington.

858, July 16, 1 p.m.

~~Confidential~~ Have you received my  
841? / Deportation of and excesses against  
peaceful Armenians is increasing and from har-  
rowing reports of eye witnesses it appears that  
a campaign of race extermination is in progress  
under a pretext of reprisal against rebellion.

Protests as well as threats are una-  
vailing and probably incite the Ottoman govern-  
ment to more drastic measures as they are deter-  
mined to disclaim responsibility for their  
absolute disregard of capitulations and I be-  
lieve nothing short of actual force which obvi-  
ously United States are not in a position to  
exert would adequately meet the situation. / Sug-  
gest you inform belligerent nations and mission  
boards of this.

AMERICAN AMBASSADOR,  
Constantinople

Deciphered by  
Tulley B. - No. 11.

RG59, 867.4016/76

Figure 3

ANI AFFIRMATION EDUCATION RESEARCH QUICK REFERENCE

Genocide  
Memorials

Photo Collections

Press Coverage

Sample Documents

Genocide Map

Genocide FAQ

Encyclopedia  
Entries

Chronology

Site Map

Background  
Reading

Related  
Organizations

Centuries of  
Genocide

America and the  
Armenian Genocide  
of 1915

## Secretary of State Robert Lansing's response to news that Ottoman Turkey is pursuing a policy of genocide against the Armenians, July 16, 1915

Home > Genocide Research > Sample Archival Documents on the Armenian Genocide

TELEGRAM SENT. GREEN CIPHER

PREPARING OFFICE WILL INDICATE WHETHER  
Collect Charge Department  
Charge to \$

INDEX BUREAU  
JUL 16 1915  
DEPT. OF STATE

Department of State, *Lansing*  
Washington, July 16, 1915.

Embassy,  
Constantinople.

865 Your, 841, July, tenth, Department, approves your procedure, in, pleading, with, Turkish, Minister of Interior, and, Minister of War, to stop, Armenian, persecution, and in, attempting to, enlist, sympathies of, German, and Austrian, Ambassadors, in this, cause, The Department, can offer, no, additional, suggestions, relative to, this, most difficult, situation, other than, that you, continue to, act as, in the past, Have any, native, born, American citizens, or any, naturalized, American citizens, entitled to protection, under, American, statutes, received, injuries, during, this, trouble?,

*Lansing*

867.4016/74

3 P/Pl

Enciphered by *W. H. A.*

Sent by operator *W. H. A.* July 16, 1915.

867.4016/74

RG59, 867.4016/74

Figure 4

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## F. WORD COUNT & LIST OF SOURCES

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Word Count: 1,847

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